



[\*On Music Theory, and Making Music More Welcoming For Everyone\* by Philip Ewell.](#) Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023. 332 pp. ISBN: 9780472075027

**Reviewed by Robin Attas**, University of Manitoba

Philip Ewell is perhaps the most (in)famous living music theorist. After beginning his career in the discipline as a scholar of Russian music and theories, Ewell shifted focus to the topic that has led to his notoriety: exposing the white supremacist<sup>1</sup> structure of music theory, with a focus on the central role of Heinrich Schenker in the development of contemporary music theory in the United States (and by extension, Canada). Ewell expands this focus in his new book, *On Music Theory, and Making Music More Welcoming for Everyone*, and also offers greater insight into the personal and professional experiences since 2019 that have

shaped disciplinary discourse on these topics. It is an essential component of a longer anti-racism reading list for anyone engaging in academic music disciplines today.

Given the topic of this book, it is important to state my positionality at the outset, particularly as it impacts my review. Among my many identities, I am a white, cisgender heterosexual woman, a non-Indigenous settler Canadian who used to be a professional music theorist and now works in educational development supporting teaching and learning initiatives related to equity, diversity, and inclusion. All of these identities impact my positionality when engaging with Ewell's book, but in particular I want to name my whiteness. This social identity means that I am part of the dominant race that is the main target of the book's critiques, and I benefit from the power and privilege this belonging affords me in music theory and society at large. My whiteness makes a critique of this book difficult. I regularly engaged with my own critical self-awareness to question whether my responses to particular passages were legitimate concerns or white fragility responses.<sup>2</sup> Even if on careful self-examination I believe my critiques to be valid, they might still be taken as anti-Black racism given my white identity and the highly charged and polarized nature of these conversations both within music theory and in society at large. I hope this review is received in a spirit of generosity, collegiality, self-reflexivity, and a desire to continue to dialogue across difference in the grey areas between polarized positions, but I acknowledge that its impact might not be thus.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: the term *white supremacy* is often associated with explicit white supremacist hate groups such as the Nazis or the Ku Klux Klan. However, it also refers to institutional and structural systems of oppression that are designed to privilege, support, and center white individuals, ideas, values, and practices (including artistic ones), while explicitly or implicitly situating all other racial groups as inferior or marginal.

<sup>2</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

I should also disclose that I know Ewell a little; we worked collaboratively for several months on a joint keynote as part of the 2022 Pedagogies into Practice conference,<sup>3</sup> and I also read an early draft of his 2020 Music Theory Online (MTO) article<sup>4</sup> when he shared it as a response to a symposium for which I was a contributing author.<sup>5</sup>

Now, to the book. *On Music Theory* includes six chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. The introduction establishes key ideas, but also introduces readers to Ewell's overall tone, which mixes breezy personal anecdotes with more conventional academic music scholarship to craft an overall argument about race and racism in music theory. Chapter 1, "On Music Theory, Race, and Racism" introduces important concepts such as the white racial frame (from sociologist Joe R. Feagin<sup>6</sup>) and white supremacy. It also presents evidence of structural racism in music theory as practiced in the United States through a discussion of some historical precedents, partial data on racial demographics in the Society for Music Theory (SMT), and more fulsome data on seven leading music theory textbooks' overwhelming emphasis on white male composers in prose, analytical method, and musical examples.

Chapter 2 deepens the historical discussion begun in Chapter 1, sketching a history of white supremacy in Europe, its manifestation in historiography generally and the discipline of classics specifically, and the resulting implications for the "standard" understanding of the history of Western music and music theory through discussions of classic works including *A History of Western Music*<sup>7</sup> and *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*.<sup>8</sup> Ewell's goal seems to be to outline a history of white supremacy in broad strokes and occasionally connect it to specific examples in music, which is a helpful overview but often left me wanting more, both in terms of the general history and the specific musical details.

One of the strongest sections of the book is Chapter 3, a reworking of Ewell's 2020 MTO article. Here Ewell takes aim at Heinrich Schenker, one of the core figures of US academic music theory, exposing not only Schenker's racist views but how they have been overlooked and outright suppressed in order to maintain the white racial frame of the discipline. Ewell reframes Schenker by bringing together consideration of his racist ideas with his theory and analytical methods and offers advice for those who question whether Schenker is still worthy of attention.

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<sup>3</sup> Robin Attas and Philip Ewell, "Beyond Inclusion, Toward Justice: Dismantling Racialized and Colonial Music Theory Pedagogical Structures," Pedagogy into Practice conference, June 4, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Philip A. Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," *Music Theory Online* 26, no.2 (2020), accessed October 6, 2023, <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Philip A. Ewell, Robin Attas, Noriko Manabe, Mitchell M. Ohriner, John J. Mattessich, and James Bungert, "Symposium on Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*," *Music Theory Online* 25, no.1 (2019): 25.17-25.1-12, accessed on October 6, 2023, <https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.19.25.1/toc.25.1.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Street Christensen, ed., *The Cambridge History of Music Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Chapter 4 (“On Volume 12 of the Journal of Schenkerian Studies”) might be characterized as the “juicy gossip” section of the book. Ewell takes an unapologetic “calling out” approach<sup>9</sup> as he offers details on the fallout from the nuclear meltdown that was volume 12 of JSS, which featured a symposium of ten articles responding to Ewell’s 2019 SMT keynote address.<sup>10</sup> The symposium was of dubious (to put it mildly) academic rigor, with many submissions likely not subject to anonymous peer review, and most submissions reading more as personal opinions (if not outright attacks) rather than thoughtful scholarship. Apart from an opportunity to tell his side of the story, Ewell uses the events as a real-world example of how white supremacy operates in music theory, although his tendency to rebut specific elements of the journal and its authors’ behaviours both in the issue and in private emails and social media conversations is a bit tedious for those who haven’t read the issue (particularly as it is difficult to find in print, owing to the scandal that ensued). I often found myself sympathetic with Ewell’s views, but felt a bit excluded from an insider music theory club, since I limit my participation in social media (upon which Ewell draws heavily) and no longer keep up with SMT politics.

“On Music Theory’s Antiblackness” (Chapter 5) is where Ewell expands beyond the JSS affair to other instances of anti-Black racism in music theory, including SMT’s attempt to create a specific publication award for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) scholars; problematic music theory journal peer review practices as demonstrated by Ewell’s own difficulties with Music Theory Online; and discussion of racism in popular music analysis and the absence of jazz in the core music theory curriculum. At times the examples lack the more careful and detailed research and data analysis found in places like Chapter 3. I agree wholeheartedly with Ewell’s claims, but I found myself wishing that Ewell had more data and specificity to support them. This could have included data on publication awards to match the textbook data Ewell uses elsewhere, integration of other scholars’ work on the role of racism in awards generally (academic or otherwise), discussion of popular music analysts and jazz music pedagogues who are practicing what Ewell suggests in analysis and classroom practices, and more. Without such evidence, Ewell’s generalist statements risk losing support from less sympathetic readers than myself.

Ewell writes that several reviewers found Chapter 6, “On Classical Music’s Antisemitism [sic],” to be out of place, and I agree. In making this assessment, I am in no way suggesting that a discussion of antisemitism in music is unimportant (as Ewell seems to imply of anyone who would reject this chapter, on p.241). Rather, I think the topic would benefit from a more thorough treatment than Ewell gives it here. In a sense, this chapter exposes for me a major gap in the book: while Ewell claims in his title to be “making music more welcoming for everyone” (emphasis mine) and

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<sup>9</sup> “Calling out” is an expression describing a blunt or forceful declaration of an individual or group’s actions as unjust, oppressive, or discriminatory; “calling in” is an expression describing a more gentle approach that invites the individual into a conversation for educative purposes. See, for example, Harvard University Office for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging, “Calling In and Calling Out Guide” (2023), available at <https://edib.harvard.edu/calling-and-calling-out-guide>.

<sup>10</sup> An expanded version of the keynote address is published as Philip A. Ewell, “Music Theory’s White Racial Frame,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 43, no.2 (Fall 2021), 324–329.

throughout the book mentions connections between anti-Black racism and sexism, anti-Asian racism, transphobia, and antisemitism, his book does not go far enough towards a true reckoning with all of these intersectional systems of oppression, and in fact, leaves some out almost entirely. (As a Canadian non-Indigenous settler who is a strong advocate for decolonization and Indigenous resurgence, I found the discussion of Indigenous ways of knowing to be cursory at best and sometimes bordering on Indigenous erasure, such as in the discussion of the “1619 Project” in the book’s conclusion.) Yes, music theory is problematic in many ways, but Ewell’s book does not do as much as his title claims for other forms of discrimination and oppression, and I think his argument would be strengthened were he to focus exclusively on anti-Black racism and its nuances.

The conclusion returns to Ewell’s overall goal of reframing music theory as white supremacist, with the bulk of the chapter focused on recommendations for change. Recommendations feature in other parts of the book, too, but the ones in the conclusion are more explicit, more specific, and more actionable. Librarians might be disappointed (or perhaps are used to?) the lack of recommendations around music library collections and their role in white supremacy, but many of Ewell’s suggested actions are helpful starting places for those working in academic music settings, and intersect well with recommendations in the Canadian context for working towards the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, such as Dylan Robinson’s “To All Who Should Be Concerned.”<sup>11</sup>

This book is an important part of music scholarship around racism and other systems of oppression and joins numerous calls for change of academic music disciplines and institutions. I can imagine that people with privilege or power, or whose social identities are called out in this book, might dismiss Ewell’s book as irrelevant: it’s a US perspective not relevant in Canada; it’s about music theory, not my music discipline; it’s about a few music theorists who don’t represent my music theory; it’s about a few explicitly racist white people, but I’m not racist like they are; it’s too general without specific context in terms of citations or theoretical grounding; it’s not music theory; and so on. Some of these may be legitimate concerns, but many are rooted in white fragility, settler moves to innocence, and defense mechanisms for those who are complicit in systems of oppression to maintain their power and privilege through maintenance of the status quo. I urge you to critically examine your own reasons for hesitating on this book and engage anyway.

But I also urge you to go beyond this book. Use it as a conversation-starter with your colleagues, friends, and family to listen and learn from each other. Use it to spur you towards the vast amount of existing material on related topics, whether broad discussions of white supremacy and racism, critical race theory, intersectionality, anti-oppression, and different forms of discrimination; or music-specific work on the problematic history of academic music disciplines, and work by racialized or otherwise minoritized music academics that demonstrates what music theory can look like when it smashes the white racial frame. One book can only do so much, and while Ewell’s *On*

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<sup>11</sup> Dylan Robinson, “To All Who Should Be Concerned,” *Intersections* 39, no.1 (2019): 137–144. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075347ar>.

*Music Theory* does good work exposing some of the white supremacist frames of music theory and music studies, there is much more to learn than what is presented here, and many more opportunities for each of us to act.